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## **The Physical Side Effects of Breast Cancer**

**By Tyler Dyck**

Breast cancer affects nearly one in seven women in some parts of the world and can also occur in men. On top of all the psychological challenges confronting people battling breast cancer, many may also face new physical difficulties as a result of breast cancer treatment. A recent study of shoulder function suggested that people who had undergone breast cancer treatment had major difficulties with simple daily activities such as reaching overhead or getting dressed, problems that just serve to compound all the frustration and emotions already at play.

Physiotherapy can help in a number of ways. If you have been diagnosed with breast cancer requiring surgical removal of the tumour, you may want to consult a physiotherapist *before* your surgery. He or she can give you gentle exercises that can be done right after your operation. A physiotherapist will also take baseline measurements in strength, range of motion, and arm circumference to know, in advance, what is "normal" for you.

Following surgery, physiotherapy can help decrease lymphedema--the arm swelling that occurs when lymph nodes are removed. Since pain is common after most types of surgery, physiotherapy can help decrease it by easing protective muscle spasms, swelling, and nerve irritation.

A physiotherapist can also help you understand which daily activities are safe after treatment. When lymph nodes are removed it's important to avoid insect bites, injections, and heavy lifting involving the affected extremity. However, there are safe and progressive exercises that you can do to increase the upper limb's flexibility and strength. What's more, getting into a staged, cardiovascular exercise routine can help with pain management and resuming a normal sleeping pattern, especially since the body becomes extremely deconditioned after surgery, radiation, and/or chemotherapy. Other specific areas where physiotherapy can help are in preventing costochondritis, a common side effect of radiation involving a painful inflammation of the joints where the ribs attach to the breastbone. Manual therapy techniques, performed by a qualified physiotherapist, can help break up scar tissue and adhesions.

It is especially important to talk to your doctor or physiotherapist in the weeks following surgery if you notice difficulty lifting your arm overhead, getting dressed, or managing daily

activities such as housecleaning. It is common for the shoulder to stiffen and become quite painful if a proper rehabilitation or exercise program is not implemented soon after surgery.

For further information on this topic please contact the Fawzia Sultan Rehabilitation Institute (FSRI) in Hawally at 264-2862, or check out our website at [www.rehabinstitutekuwait.com](http://www.rehabinstitutekuwait.com)

The author of this article, Tyler Dyck is the Executive Clinic Director of the FSRI is a Fellow of the Canadian Academy of Manual and Manipulative Physiotherapists, a Sports Physiotherapy Specialist, and a Certified Intramuscular Stimulation Acupuncture Practitioner.